

Photography

Research Notes

Visual Interpretation of Urban Space in Yogyakarta

Alvin Fernanda Priadi Putra

Department of Photography,
Faculty of Visual Arts,
Indonesian Institute of the
Arts Yogyakarta

Abstract: This paper explores the conceptual relationship between urban space and photography by positioning the city as a form of visual narrative. Rather than treating photography as a tool of documentation, this study argues that photographic practices actively construct and mediate the meaning of urban environments. Drawing on visual culture theory, semiotics, and spatial theory (particularly the works of Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes), this paper develops a framework for understanding how cities can be “read” through images. The analysis is situated within the context of Yogyakarta, a city characterized by the coexistence of traditional and modern spatial practices. Through a descriptive-interpretative approach, the study demonstrates that urban photography does not merely capture reality but shapes visual narratives by selecting, framing, and organizing elements of everyday life. The findings suggest that photography plays a crucial role in constructing urban meaning, influencing how space is perceived, experienced, and interpreted. This paper contributes to visual culture and design discourse by proposing a conceptual model of the city as a narratively constructed visual field.

Correspondence Author:
alvinp4388@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Cities have long been understood as complex entities that extend beyond their material and spatial configurations. Traditionally approached through architecture, planning, and geography, contemporary urban discourse increasingly recognizes cities as dynamic sites of meaning production shaped by social practices, cultural expressions, and visual representations. This shift reflects a broader epistemological movement within the humanities and social sciences, in which the visual is no longer treated as supplementary to knowledge but as constitutive of how knowledge itself is formed (Rose, 2022). Within this expanded framework, the city emerges not merely as a physical environment but as a visual field, a space that is continuously produced, mediated, and interpreted through images. Among the various visual media that contribute to this process, photography occupies a particularly significant role. Its capacity to isolate moments, frame perspectives, and render the ordinary visible positions it as a central tool in shaping how urban life is perceived and understood. However, despite its prominence, photography is still often regarded as a neutral or objective medium that passively documents reality.



Such an assumption has been widely challenged in contemporary scholarship. Rather than reflecting reality, photography is now understood as a practice that actively constructs meaning through selective representation, aesthetic decisions, and contextual framing (Batchen, 2021; Azoulay, 2021). Each photograph is the result of a series of choices (what to include, what to exclude, where to stand, and when to capture), that inevitably transform the city into a structured visual narrative. In this sense, photography does not simply record urban space; it participates in its symbolic production. This perspective aligns with developments in visual culture studies, where images are seen as active agents in social and cultural processes. As argued by Aiello and Parry (2020), visual representations play a critical role in shaping collective understanding, particularly in urban contexts where visual stimuli are dense and continuously evolving. The city, therefore, can be read not only through its physical form but also through its visual manifestations, which mediate the relationship between space and meaning.

The relevance of this discussion becomes particularly evident in the context of Yogyakarta. As a city widely recognized for its rich cultural heritage and ongoing urban transformation, Yogyakarta embodies a complex spatial condition in which traditional and modern elements coexist. Historic sites, informal street economies, contemporary developments, and everyday social interactions intersect within a dense visual landscape. This layered environment provides a compelling context for examining how urban space can be interpreted through photographic practices. Despite the growing body of research on urban representation, a conceptual gap remains in understanding the relationship between photography and urban narrative. Much of the existing literature either focuses on urban space as a material phenomenon or on photography as a technical and aesthetic practice. Less attention has been given to how photography functions as a narrative mechanism that organizes urban experience into meaningful visual structures.

This paper addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that positions the city as a narrative constructed through photographic interpretation. Specifically, it asks: How can urban space be understood as a visual narrative through photography? In answering this question, the study integrates spatial theory, semiotics, and visual culture to explore how images mediate urban meaning. Rather than treating photography as a tool of documentation, this paper argues that it operates as a form of visual mediation that actively constructs, organizes, and communicates narratives about the city.

METHODS

This research adopts a conceptual qualitative methodology grounded in descriptive-interpretative analysis. Unlike empirical studies that rely on fieldwork or data collection, conceptual research focuses on the development of theoretical frameworks that can explain relationships between phenomena. In the context of design and visual culture, such approaches are particularly valuable for examining abstract constructs such as representation, perception, and meaning (Vaughan, 2020). The methodological framework of this study is structured around three interrelated components: theoretical synthesis, interpretative analysis, and contextual grounding.

The first stage involves the integration of key theoretical perspectives from multiple disciplines, including urban theory, semiotics, and visual culture. This interdisciplinary approach reflects the complexity of the subject matter, where urban space cannot be fully understood through a single disciplinary lens. From spatial theory, the study draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre, who conceptualizes space as a socially produced phenomenon shaped by the interaction between physical structures, social practices, and symbolic representations. This framework provides a foundation for understanding the city as a dynamic and relational construct. From semiotics, the study incorporates the ideas of Roland Barthes, particularly the distinction between denotation

and connotation. This perspective enables the analysis of photographic images as systems of signs that convey both literal and cultural meanings. Additionally, visual culture theory is employed to situate photography within broader socio-cultural processes. Recent scholarship emphasizes that images are not passive reflections but active participants in shaping perception and knowledge (Rose, 2022; Pink, 2021).

The second component of the methodology is a descriptive-interpretative approach that focuses on how meaning is constructed through visual representation. This approach involves two key stages: (1) Descriptive stage, identifying visual elements within photographic representations, including composition and spatial arrangement, human presence and activity, material and environmental context; (2) Interpretative stage, examining how these elements contribute to broader narratives about urban life, such as social interaction, cultural identity, and spatial negotiation. This approach aligns with contemporary visual methodologies that emphasize interpretation as a central analytical process (Pink, 2021).

The final component involves situating the conceptual framework within the context of Yogyakarta. Rather than functioning as an empirical case study, Yogyakarta is used as a conceptual illustration that reflects the complexity of urban visual culture. This strategy allows the study to remain theoretical while still maintaining relevance to real-world conditions. By referencing a specific urban context, the paper avoids excessive abstraction and provides a grounded understanding of how visual narratives operate in practice.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Urban Space as a Constructed Reality

Urban space cannot be understood as a fixed or neutral entity; rather, it is continuously produced, negotiated, and interpreted through social, cultural, and representational processes. The foundational argument of Henri Lefebvre emphasizes that space is not merely a physical container but a dynamic construct shaped by the interaction between material conditions, social practices, and symbolic systems. This triadic understanding of space encompassing spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces reveals that the city is inherently layered and relational. However, beyond its production, urban space is also subject to interpretation, particularly through visual mediation. Contemporary urban theory suggests that the meaning of space is not inherent but emerges through processes of perception and representation (Merrifield, 2020; Soja, 2021). In this sense, the city exists not only as a built environment but as an interpretative field in which multiple meanings coexist and compete. This interpretability is crucial in understanding the role of photography. If space is already constructed and layered, then any visual representation of it inevitably participates in selecting, organizing, and emphasizing particular aspects over others. Thus, urban space is not only produced but also re-produced visually, creating a secondary layer of meaning that shapes how the city is understood. From this perspective, the city can be conceptualized as a semiotic landscape, where physical elements (streets, buildings, human activities) function as signs that can be read and interpreted. Photography, therefore, becomes a key mechanism in translating this landscape into a structured visual form, enabling the city to be experienced as a narrative rather than a mere spatial arrangement.

Photography as Visual Mediation

Photography should not be understood as a transparent medium that simply reflects reality, but as an active system of mediation that transforms the visible world into meaningful representation. Drawing on Roland Barthes, photographic images operate within a semiotic framework where meaning is constructed through the interaction between denotation and connotation. While denotation refers to the apparent content of the image, connotation

introduces cultural, emotional, and ideological layers that shape interpretation. Yet, this semiotic reading alone is insufficient without considering the processual nature of photographic practice. Every photograph is the result of a series of decisions (framing, timing, angle, distance) that actively structure the visual field. These decisions are not neutral; they are shaped by the photographer's perspective, intention, and socio-cultural positioning (Rose, 2022; Azoulay, 2021). As such, photography does not merely capture the city but reconfigures it into a particular visual logic. In the context of urban space, this reconfiguration is particularly significant. Cities are characterized by complexity, density, and multiplicity, making it impossible to represent them in their entirety. Photography, therefore, operates through reduction and selection, isolating fragments of urban reality and presenting them as meaningful units. This fragmentation is not a limitation but a fundamental characteristic of visual representation, enabling the construction of narratives through partial views. Moreover, photography introduces a temporal dimension into the representation of space. By capturing specific moments, it freezes the fluidity of urban life, transforming dynamic processes into static images. However, these images retain traces of temporality, allowing viewers to reconstruct narratives about movement, interaction, and change. In this sense, photography mediates not only spatial but also temporal aspects of the city. Thus, photography can be understood as a mediating interface between the material city and its symbolic interpretation, translating complex urban realities into structured visual forms that can be read, interpreted, and narrated.

The City as Visual Narrative

When considered collectively, photographic representations of the city form a narrative system that extends beyond individual images. The concept of the city as a visual narrative emerges from the understanding that meaning is constructed not through isolated images but through relationships between visual elements, sequences, and interpretations. Narrative in this context does not follow a linear, textual structure but operates through visual logic. Elements such as repetition, contrast, juxtaposition, and spatial arrangement contribute to the formation of meaning (Ryan, 2021). A single photograph may suggest a moment, but a series of images or even a single complex frame can evoke broader narratives about urban life. This narrative construction relies on several key mechanisms: (1) Framing, defining what is included and excluded, thereby shaping the boundaries of meaning; (2) Selection, choosing specific subjects, moments, or locations that represent particular aspects of the city; (3) Composition, organizing visual elements to guide the viewer's attention and interpretation; (4) Juxtaposition, creating relationships between elements that produce contrast or continuity. Through these mechanisms, photography transforms fragmented urban scenes into coherent narrative structures. The city becomes readable not as a complete entity but as a constellation of visual fragments that collectively suggest patterns of life, movement, and interaction. Importantly, this narrative is not fixed but open-ended. Meaning emerges through the interaction between the image and the viewer, influenced by cultural context, prior knowledge, and interpretative frameworks. As such, the city as visual narrative is not a singular story but a multiplicity of possible readings, each shaped by different perspectives.

Yogyakarta as a Narrative Field

The urban environment of Yogyakarta provides a compelling illustration of the conceptual framework outlined above. As a city that embodies both historical continuity and contemporary transformation, Yogyakarta presents a complex visual landscape in which multiple spatial and cultural layers coexist. This coexistence can be observed in the juxtaposition of: (1) Traditional architecture and modern infrastructure; (2) Formal urban planning and informal spatial practices; (3) Cultural rituals and everyday economic activities. Such conditions create a visually dense and heterogeneous environment, where meaning is not centralized but distributed across different spatial and social contexts. From a photographic perspective, this complexity allows

for the construction of diverse narratives. For instance, images of traditional markets may evoke continuity and cultural identity, while scenes of urban development may suggest change and modernization. Informal street activities, on the other hand, can reveal processes of negotiation and adaptation within urban space. Importantly, these narratives do not exist independently but intersect and overlap, reflecting the hybrid nature of the city. This aligns with contemporary discussions on Southeast Asian urbanism, which emphasize the fluid and relational character of urban space (Douglass & Roberts, 2020). Thus, Yogyakarta can be understood as a narrative field a space where multiple stories are continuously produced through the interaction between physical environment, social practice, and visual representation. Photography, in this context, serves as a tool for revealing and constructing these narratives, making visible the complexity of urban life.

Visual Interpretation and Urban Meaning

The final dimension of this discussion concerns the role of interpretation in the construction of urban meaning. While photography mediates and structures visual representation, it is through interpretation that meaning is ultimately produced. Visual culture studies emphasize that meaning does not reside within images themselves but emerges through the interaction between image, context, and viewer (Rose, 2022). This interpretative process is shaped by cultural frameworks, personal experiences, and social contexts, making it inherently subjective and dynamic. In the context of urban photography, interpretation plays a critical role in transforming visual representation into narrative understanding. The viewer does not simply observe the image but actively engages with it, constructing meaning by connecting visual elements, recognizing patterns, and situating the image within broader cultural and spatial contexts. This process highlights the co-constitutive relationship between space, image, and interpretation. Urban space provides the material and symbolic resources for representation; photography organizes these resources into visual form; and interpretation translates them into meaning. As a result, the city can be understood not as a fixed reality but as an ongoing process of meaning-making, continuously shaped by visual practices and interpretative engagement. Photography, therefore, does not merely depict the city it participates in its conceptualization, influencing how it is perceived, understood, and imagined.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the conceptual relationship between urban space and photography by positioning the city as a narratively constructed visual field. Moving beyond the conventional understanding of photography as a neutral tool of documentation, this study has argued that photographic practices actively participate in shaping urban meaning through processes of framing, selection, and visual organization. By integrating spatial theory, semiotics, and visual culture, the paper demonstrates that the city is not simply observed through images, but is continuously constructed and reinterpreted through them. A central contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of urban space as an interpretative and semiotic environment. Drawing on the spatial framework of Henri Lefebvre, the paper highlights that space is produced through the interaction of material conditions, social practices, and symbolic meanings. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the city as a layered and dynamic construct, rather than a fixed physical entity. When approached through photography, these layers are selectively framed and reorganized, enabling the emergence of visual narratives that reflect the complexity of urban life. At the same time, the study emphasizes the role of photography as a system of visual mediation. Through the semiotic lens of Roland Barthes, photographic images are understood as carriers of both denotative and connotative meaning. However, beyond their semiotic structure, photographs are also shaped by the practices and decisions involved in their production. As such, photography is not merely representational but performative, actively

constructing particular versions of reality. This insight reinforces the argument that images do not simply depict urban space but participate in its symbolic production. By bringing these perspectives together, the paper proposes a conceptual framework in which the city is understood as a visual narrative constructed through photographic interpretation. In this framework, narrative emerges not as a fixed storyline but as a relational process involving visual elements, spatial contexts, and interpretative engagement. The city becomes readable through fragments (moments, scenes, and interactions) that are organized into meaningful structures through photographic practices.

The contextual discussion of Yogyakarta further illustrates the applicability of this framework. As a city characterized by the coexistence of tradition and modernity, formal and informal spatial practices, Yogyakarta presents a rich visual landscape that supports multiple narrative interpretations. Through photographic representation, these conditions can be articulated as overlapping narratives that reveal the hybrid and evolving nature of urban life. This reinforces the argument that urban space is not singular in meaning but inherently plural, shaped by diverse visual and cultural perspectives. Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study also offers implications for the broader field of visual culture and design. By positioning photography as a narrative practice, the paper encourages a shift in how visual media are understood—not merely as tools of representation, but as active agents in shaping perception and knowledge. This perspective is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts where visual images play an increasingly dominant role in mediating urban experience, both in physical and digital environments. Furthermore, the conceptual framework developed in this study opens possibilities for future research. Empirical investigations may explore how different photographic practices produce varying urban narratives across contexts, while comparative studies could examine how cities with distinct cultural and spatial characteristics generate different visual interpretations. In addition, practice-based research may extend this framework by examining how photographers consciously construct narratives through their work.

In conclusion, this paper argues that the relationship between city and image is not merely representational but fundamentally constitutive. Photography does not simply record the city; it participates in its ongoing construction as a field of meaning. By understanding the city as a visual narrative, this study contributes to a more nuanced perspective on urban space—one that acknowledges the central role of visual mediation in shaping how cities are perceived, experienced, and imagined.

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